

# UNITY UNDER

## CHRISTENDOM

### GERMAN ROMANTICISM'S

#### MIDDLE AGES

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Schiller famously characterized Friedrich Schlegel as an "unbescheiden kalten Witzling"—an immodest, cold, comical figure. Schiller never changed his mind, and one might add that the comment is about as close as Schlegel ever came to being allied with the funny. And yet Schlegel (the unstressed Schlegel here will be Friedrich) — Schlegel places humor at the heart of his theory for the new movement of which he is the founder and theorist: early German Romanticism, or the small group known as the *Frühromantiker*. The group comprised, as is well-known, the two Schlegels, Novalis, Tieck, and Wackenroder, to name the most important. Moreover, and significantly, the Middle Ages (as they were understood) are Schlegel's model for a near-utopia, as they are for Novalis, Tieck and August Wilhelm Schlegel. Both concepts — that is, Schlegel's brand of humor and the more general idea of the Middle Ages — are grounded in a philosophy that privileges "unity" in a manner both enthusiastic and mystical, to use the romantic vocabulary.

Such an emphasis on unity does not come without certain retrospective political implications, of course. The radical aspect of the *Frühromantiker* has attracted some scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> Much more has been done, however, on the subtle but insistent conservative element that underscores the early Schlegel's dicta.<sup>2</sup> Though Schlegel began his romantic project with a theory that was at least putatively limited to the literary and philosophical, it has not been difficult for scholars to see a

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certain political conservatism and thus, trajectory. This conservatism can be seen, at least on the face of it, as rather easily and naturally supporting the nationalist, proto-fascist discourse that was to follow. For example, Fichte's *Rede an die deutsche Nation* [Speeches to the German Nation] are, on the one hand, clear descendents of his own early philosophy — as are the Romantics themselves. But at the same time, the *Frühromantiker* notions about unity, freedom and a medieval Europe united under Christianity contributed in large part to the popularity and acceptance of the later Fichte's alarming rhetoric.

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Clearly, it is not only a cliché, but simply wrong to draw a straight, inevitable line from Schlegel's notions on the fragment to proto-fascistic nationalism. Nor do I wish here to consider that other category — totalitarianism — as somehow the "natural" outgrowth of the romantic *Einheit*, a position that would (among other things) lead me to fall into the trap that Žižek has recently so cleverly articulated. Totalitarianism, he writes, "far from being an effective theoretical concept, is a kind of *stopgap*: instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively prevents us from thinking."<sup>3</sup> This is a point of view with which I largely concur, though perhaps not for the same reasons as Žižek. Nor will I be engaging in the current elevation of Hannah Arendt, which we do not need Žižek to note has become *de rigueur* in academic circles at the moment. My point here is not totalitarianism: neither its biography, nor its early childhood, nor its discernable adolescence in some of the nineteenth-century German states.

The *frühromantiker* notion of *Einheit*, and the *Fragmente* which promise it, are not the ancestors of "totalitarianism." These terms do, on the other hand, betray a nostalgia for a certain sovereignty — whether it be that of a future nation state, or of the self — in the wake of post-Enlightenment confusion (for lack of a better word), or anxiety. Kant's first *Kritik* famously caused a good deal of such confusion. Kleist's overly cited "Kant

Krise," for example, laments that after reading the first *Kritik*, it is as if we were all wearing green glasses, and it was thus impossible to determine whether things are green because of the glasses, or really green. "Wir können nicht entscheiden," writes Kleist, "ob das, was wir Wahrheit nennen, wahrhaft Wahrheit ist, oder ob es uns nur so scheint" [We cannot decide whether what we call truth, is truthfully the truth, or whether it only seems to be so to us]. Since this realization, Kleist writes, he has been unable to touch a single book. Kant, who wrote his first *Kritik* to overcome the paralysis of Humean skepticism, as he put it, produced a kind of paralysis of his own.

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Whatever the reasons for post-Enlightenment *angoisse*, and they have been too sufficiently documented to warrant rehearsal here, it remains the case that there was a pervasive sense that things that had heretofore been seen as one were suddenly, somehow falling into pieces. Indeed, as Niklas Luhmann has noted, around and after 1770, the notion of the ego or *das Ich* becomes somewhat of an obsession.<sup>4</sup> Fichte's idea that the ego can be discerned by what is *not* the ego (*Nicht-Ich*), serves as a symptom of the sense that things are falling apart, that there is no longer a single, whole self. On the other hand, the dialectic Fichte posits between the *Ich* and the *Nicht-Ich* allows for the hypostatization of the *absolutes Ich*, a kind of total synthesis before the Hegelian *Geist*. A split subject, in other words, long before Lacan was to formulate it in his "Mirror Stage," is Fichte's assumption; but unlike Lacan, Fichte has a way of stitching the fissure back up: the *absolutes Ich*. If Descartes was examining the split between body and mind, the post-Enlightenment was frequently met with the split in the mind itself, or at least in an inability to be certain that what you see is what you get (Kleist's green glasses). Such an epistemological gap, which Kant posits as the ineluctable debarring of noumena from phenomena, can in fact, in my view, be understood as naturally leading to a desire for unity, for the seamless dimension of myth, and by extension to a longing for

the unity of the mind with the world, of the nation state with its analog of imaginary sovereignty. As Fichte's *Ich* and *Nicht-Ich* demonstrate the disconnect of mind from mind, and at once allow for the promise of the *absolutes Ich*, so the *Frühromantiker* obsession with fragments and aphoristic pieces of prose mirror the same disconnect even as they too point to a comforting ultimate unity.

One might say that transcendental idealism itself, in its various forms, provides the erasure of fragmentation even as it articulates the disjunctures.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Fichte's famous metaphor of the prism, articulates precisely this: as we are on the refracted side of the prism, we see everything broken into shards, colors, multifariousness, etc. But the manifold is created on the other side of the prism, by a single (absolute) light. Thus for Fichte, the fragmentation on this side of the prism is an illusion caused by refraction (*Reflexion* — a pun of which Fichte makes much). There is in fact only one source for everything, which is the absolute (*Sein*). "Erhebe über diesen Schein," concludes Fichte, "dich zum Denken; lass von diesem dich ergreifen: und du wirst von nun an nur ihm Glauben beimessen" [Rise above this appearance, to thought; let yourself be taken up by it: and you will from then on give credence only to faith].<sup>6</sup>

So now let us return to the two central, yet seemingly unrelated notions, of Schlegel and his circle; notions that equally demonstrate the symptom of disconnection and of ultimate unity: Schlegelian humor and the romantic idea of the Middle Ages. These two ideas delineate the early project of Romanticism, and provide part of the intellectual grounding on which the later agenda of intense nationalism was able to take hold. For the *Frühromantiker*, humor is a stance which allows for the synthesis of discrepancy. And their vision of the Middle Ages, at least as much as the fragment itself, constitutes how Schlegel and company understood the state and its moral role in the *Lebensraum*. If, as Benedict Anderson notes (*Imagined Communities*), the second half of the nineteenth century in

Europe is the "era of official nationalisms", the stage is set and the impulse choreographed in the project of the early Romantics. Their notion of humor and medieval life, combine to support the national fervor in the mid nineteenth century. Here lie the underpinnings which will produce nationalist imaginaries; and yet neither this background, nor its major figures, are mentioned in Anderson's well-known work, the subtitle of which is, after all, "Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism".

Let us begin with what Schlegel calls humor. It is worth noting here that just as Freud's book on jokes is fascinating but extremely unfunny, so Schlegel's notion of humor is abstract and rhetorical at best, and never amusing. The two main words that he uses in the vocabulary of humor are romantic irony (the latter of which Hegel noted Schlegel had invented) and wit (*Witz*), with related terms such as sarcasm, naïveté, play, buffoonery, the grotesque, and satire. These terms, it should be noted, have to do with a certain distance. That is, they are all for Schlegel what he called a *Haltung*: a self-conscious stance in relation to a dialectic of opposing, contradictory terms. Indeed, the dictionary definition of wit is the combination of heterogeneous things, or the use of *double entendre*, which itself puts two different elements under the same rubric. Schlegel uses this definition as a model for his critical theory, or philosophy.

Humor itself for Schlegel is precisely a combination of antimonies (whereas for Freud it will be the element of surprise). In Fragment #305, Schlegel notes that naïveté (which is to be understood as self-conscious) — "plays with the contradictions of theory and praxis" as does the grotesque, which cultivates the appearance of the fortuitous and the strange.<sup>7</sup> Humor itself, he adds, "has to do with being and non-being, its own essence being that of reflection". The key term here is reflection (*Reflexion*), to be understood not only as self-consciousness, but (a play on words in itself, as noted earlier) also as a mirror-image, that inverted and apparently contradictory representation — for

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Schlegel, the other side of the same coin. The contradictions, in other words, are only *Schein*, appearance, but one must have distance in order to recognize that. Apparent antimonies are such for Schlegel only in the realm of phenomena (the *mannigfaltig*); from a transcendental perspective, however, they are part of the whole. Thus humor is allied with the elegy, for example, because both are transcendental. Both are a *Haltung*, which Schlegel here calls a "balancing act": "As geniality," he writes, "is necessary to naïveté, so pure and serious beauty is necessary to humor. Humor likes to balance on the light and clear rhapsodies of philosophy or poetry, and flees from heaviness and detached pieces." Herein lies the reason for which Schlegel calls *Witz* "mystical" — it is the self-conscious stance of distance, which allows for the recognition of antimonies as transcended by a higher unity. Laughter, which recognizes incongruities in this manner, is therefore "holy."

Now, for anyone familiar with Fichte's early philosophy, the influence here is clear. Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* posits, as we have seen, a fundamental dialectic (which was to have a major impact on Hegel's *Phenomenology*), namely that between the I (*Ich*) and the Not-I (*Nicht-Ich*). This dialectic is synthesized (and precisely not sublated, or *aufgehoben*, as in Hegel) by the Absolute-I (*das absolute Ich*) which oversees and transcends them both. Fichte's analogy of the prism once again is significant here: what we see refracted through the lens of the prism appears to be multifarious, but all of this confusion is the result of a single white light which breaks itself into millions of pieces. So too with the world: what we experience as different phenomena within the finite is merely emanating from a single infinity, or numenon. The other influence on Fichte's thought is science: the galvanic properties of minerals, too, as negative and positive, become one substance. (Goethe's *Elective Affinities* takes the polar attractions as its founding metaphor.) In Schlegel, the influence of Hume, Locke, Condorcet, Spinoza and particularly Hemsterhuis is also to be noted here — all fascinate

him with respect to the combination of dissimilar ideas. The "dynamic paradoxes" of physics which so influenced the period become the models for a new transcendentalism grounded in totality. Far from the deconstructive move to annihilate or at least destabilize binaries, here the dialectic of antimonies serves first to posit apparent contradiction, but then to point to the unity which under- and overlies everything. Binaries, in other words, are in the service of totality.

It is an arguably straight line from Fichte's dialectic of antimonies to Schlegel's romantic theory of *chaotische Einheit* [chaotic unity], a term which itself, in its oxymoronic catachresis, performs the very combination proposed: opposing terms serve the purpose of demonstrating a transcendental unity. As Schlegel puts it, to say "transcendental idealism" is redundant. *Witz* itself is a synthetic a priori, but without Kant's limits (indeed, the whole project of Fichte's philosophy is to "correct" Kant's First Kritik and allow for transcendental thought in precisely the speculative way Kant opposed). Schlegel's idea of *Mischung* is just such a mixture of apparent opposites pointing to a higher totality. And this notion permeates everything he wants to have called "romantic." In Fragment #156 from the *Athenäum*, Schlegel notes that the comical *Witz* (the right kind for him) is a mixture of the epic and the iambic, just as Homer is both Aristophanes and Archilocus. (Eichner: 190) Shakespeare is to be revered for the same reason: he mixes comedy with tragedy, the high with the low. Romantic writing must, Schlegel insists everywhere, mix genres (poetry and prose); disciplines (philosophy and literature, science and narration); styles (the grotesque and the beautiful); male and female; individuality and community; Hamlet and Don Quixote; the impertinence of Diderot with the sentimentality of Rousseau; and so on. Schlegel's willful oxymorons proliferate: the symmetry of contradiction, ordered confusion, chaotic unity, fragmented totality; ironic enthusiasm. All of this Schlegel was to call "Universalpoesie," Symphilosophie, Sympoesie — the

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Greek "sym" appended to underline combination, the arabesque being the privileged figure of illustration, and the whole called romanticism.

I began by noting that most of the lexicon of humor used by Schlegel implies distance. It also implies the antimonies inherent in the terms of humor: wit, as we have noted, is the ability to perceive humorously the relation of similarity between seemingly incongruous or disparate things; sarcasm uses statements in opposition to their purport; irony is the use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning; the grotesque engages a ludicrous distortion, an incompatible medley. All of these have to do with incongruity and with standing back (the *Haltung*) in order to see the way in which opposites in fact melt (Schlegel's word) into one. It is in this sense that Schlegel activates the adage that knowledge is distance, and that idealism is by definition transcendental.

*Witz* lies at the heart of antimonies, and is moreover the foundation for that most *früromantik* of all genres: the fragment. The fragment for Schlegel takes its cue from Montaigne's *Essais*, Pascal's *Pensées*, La Rochefoucauld's maxims, Shaftsbury, and Chamfort. The fragment is like a fraction, says Schlegel, suggesting totality by its very nature as a part. So too, the ruins which the Romantics so love — they too are vestiges which are broken and as if incomplete, but suggest former cultures and époques of completeness. There is such a thing as an architectonic wit, writes Schlegel (*Ath.* #383), which by virtue of its satirical expressions produces veritable sarcasm. Such wit must be both systematic and anti-system (another incongruity). (Eichner: 236) But more to the point for the fragment, we read: "In spite of all completeness something must appear to be missing, as if torn away. Such a baroque quality could itself engender a great style of *Witz*." Hence aphorisms, non-discursive thoughts, variety and mixture, incompleteness, dissemination as against Kantian categories, no clear objective, anonymous compositions — all of these are to be characteristics



of the romantic fragment. As Maurice Blanchot was to note, the fragment for the *Frühromantiker* surpasses totality itself. We might add that it is the logical choice for a philosophical and critical movement that wants to suggest the platonic whole through the part.

This epistemology of metonymy leads, therefore, to a *mathesis universalis* in Descartes' sense, as well as to Schiller's universal history, and to Kant's universal science. Schlegel called such combinatory moves a "transcendental chemistry," and a universal poetry. Indeed, the project of an encyclopedia was one of the major aspirations of the *Frühromantiker*. The encyclopedia, which was never finished, was to be, in Schlegel's words, "a romantic plan for the unification of all knowledge... the establishment of universal knowledge [*Wissenschaft*]." This Enlightenment-like project was in fact to be anti-reason, for it was to be grounded on fragments, aphorisms, and the combination, as always, of antimonies. It was then to be paratactic, the mental conjunctions provided by the transcendental ideal of which the parts reminded, indeed even provided for.

It is not surprising that this form of philosophic-literary transcendentalism, has as one of its many aspects the strong wish to unite the German states. One might argue here that the fragmentary nature of these states would work well with Schlegel's idea of parts of a greater whole. The problem at the end of the eighteenth century, however, was that there was no greater political whole to which the German states could belong. Hence, the *Frühromantiker* emphasis on Teutonic myths as against ancient mythology; pagan and Celtic roots in Christianity; and above all, a "return" to Catholicism, "die alte, grosse Glaube," as Tieck puts it. The turn to the European Middle Ages, therefore, is a logical one within this perspective.

If I have spent this long on the *frühromantiker* notion of humor and how it is connected with a privileging of totality, it is because I want to make clear why such a philosophy of totality

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motivates a nostalgia for the Middle Ages. There is, with few exceptions, very little in-depth historical knowledge of medieval culture *per se*.<sup>8</sup> Any kind of real knowledge of medieval people is largely sacrificed on the altar of this belief in totality. Such does not, however, seem to be the case at first glance. After all, the very word *Romantic* comes from the medieval romances. But for the *Frühromantiker*, the word means above all that which is not classical. It had already been used in this sense by Thomas Warten (1774) in his *History of English Poetry*, meaning that which is "gothic" and therefore not classical. Herder used it in this sense as well. Chateaubriand, following Warten, employs the term in his *Essais sur les révolutions*. Novalis uses it as a noun in 1798 to mean a writer of fairy tales. But in his famous fragment #116 (Eichner: 182), Schlegel uses the term differently. It is here that he refers to romantic poetry as a "universal, progressive" one and writes of wit and totality as part of romantic philosophy, in the manner which we have been considering. Die romantische Poesie ist eine progressive Universalpoesie...

In turning away from the classics (although he is clearly obsessed with them, and refers to them all the time), Schlegel nonetheless remains fascinated with their mythology. The great throng of gods is for him the best way to manifest the "chaotic unity" which he wants to achieve. Mythology provided a center for the ancients; a center which moderns lack. A new mythology must therefore be produced, but one which comes from deep in the mind (*Geist*), and which will be inseparable from poetry. The new mythology that Schlegel calls for is thus one with consciousness, one (he firmly believes) that will therefore be better and more beautiful than that of the ancients.<sup>9</sup> There are sparks of divinity in man, he continues, and mythology is the hieroglyphic expression of nature transformed through fantasy and love. This new mythology, moreover, should be based on the fantastic and on Indo-European myths more than on ancient ones. Hence, the insistence among the *Frühromantiker* on fairy

tales and medieval legends. The *Minnesänger*, *Nibelungenlied*, *Heldenbuch* now become source stories for the romantic imagination. King Arthur and his knights, the Troubadours, Charlemagne, the *Chronicon Thuringiae*, the *Vita rythmica Saint Elisabethae*, and every Germanic legend known become further grist for the romantic mill. But all must be approached with the *Haltung* of irony — that is, with the distance of time, style, and self-consciousness. It should be remembered here that the Middle Ages were considered, in seventeenth-century France and in the German states, a barbaric period between the great Roman Empire and the renaissance. The eighteenth century also rejected medieval culture as vulgar, gothic and fantastic, qualities obviously displeasing to the Enlightenment. But it is precisely these — the fantastic and barbaric — that appeal to the anti-classical Schlegel, along with the fact that the very literature he wishes to surpass and resist scorns the culture of the Middle Ages. Moreover, Schlegel prides himself on his philological knowledge and general linguistic ability. It is arguable, for example, that Schlegel considers Middle high German, like romanticism itself, a language in the making. Schlegel loves inventing neologisms and bizarre turns of phrase. The lack of a standardized orthography in medieval manuscripts, the discovery of the powers and limits of language, are aspects of medieval writing that fascinated Schlegel who, after all, was to study Sanskrit and become the first professor of comparative literature in Europe.

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It has frequently been noted that European medieval literature tends to divide by class: between that for and by nobles (stories of knights, *amour courtois*, elegance and refinement) on the one hand, and the literature for the burghers (comical, satirical, realistic, good-humored). Unsurprisingly, Schlegel wants to combine these differing styles. Indeed, in his opinion it is just this combination which makes for the genius of Shakespeare.

The topic of love itself, furthermore, becomes for those who follow Schlegel a combination of *amour courtois* and a kind

of enthusiastic (if not bawdy) free love. The *frühromantiker* texts engage in *amour courtois* in that the "princesse de loin," à la Jaufré Rudel, for example, is unattainable because she always dies. Novalis' *Hymnen an die Nacht* are to his dead love Sophie; Mathilde in his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* also dies, to be replaced as it were (through some sort of metempsychosis, or transmigration of souls) by the exotic Cyane followed by Zulima. Lucinde, in Schlegel's novel of the same name, mysteriously disappears from the book after an illness. And so on. The dead women remain the male poets' muses, however.<sup>10</sup> The free love aspect (which Schlegel preached, it should be noted) is so overt in *Lucinde* that the book caused a scandal (and was thus avidly read). It should be noted as well that the transmigration of souls is another aspect of unity; the various women all represent love, of which they are the metonymic, if passionate, symbols. Indeed, if it is not an earthly woman who dies, there is always the Virgin Mary, as in Tieck's (although authorship is not certain, and Wackenroder may have collaborated) *Herzensergiessungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders*, which tells the story (among many others) of a young artist who travels to Italy and, upon falling in love, returns to Catholicism and particularly to the Virgin. The Middle Ages are finally particularly privileged because "at that time," Schlegel maintains (he remains vague about dates), political and the religious authorities were combined. The kingdoms, principalities and fiefdoms of Europe, in other words, were Catholic and "thus" united.

In his own age, writes Schlegel, there is a revolution afoot; one that has already manifested itself in science (*Realpoesie*, its natural philosophical expression). But "revolution" is not an innocent term, and its political aspect must not be overlooked. The Middle Ages are understood by Schlegel as the time which gave birth to national feeling in harmony with a concomitant, harmonious religious community. Historically reductive (not to mention simply wrong) a view as this may be of the Middle Ages, the Germanic desire for unity in its political aspect corresponds

with and is clearly inspired by, the Napoleonic wars (1789-1815). Indeed, Napoleon is ironically enough one of the unifiers of Germany, despite Hegel's conviction that the little colonel was the Zeitgeist on horseback. We should not be surprised that Schlegel's conversion to Catholicism (1808) coincides with his political activism in Germanic liberalism and, a year later, with his help in writing the appeal to the German people, issued by Archduke Charles. Ten years after that, Schlegel was to become the editor of a right-wing Catholic paper, *Concordia*. The nostalgia for the Middle Ages, its imagined happy unity of Church and the medieval version of State, lends itself to a specific nineteenth-century political *Haltung* without much irony: a German nationalism with a Catholic foundation, Germanic unity under Christendom.

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All of this would be mere biographical detail if this attitude were not astonishingly pervasive among the best known of the early romantics, Schlegel's doctrinal authority notwithstanding. Within the space of four years, four major texts appeared idealizing the Middle Ages as a paradisiac time of unity under Christendom. These four texts, one French and three German, are: Chateaubriand's *Le génie du Christianisme* (1800); August Wilhelm Schlegel's *Geschichte der romantischen Literatur* (1802); Tieck's *Vorrede zum den Minneliedern aus dem Schwäbischen Zeitalter* (1803); and Novalis's *Die Christenheit oder Europa* (1799). In other words, if we include Schlegel's lectures on the importance of the Middle Ages, every major figure of the Frühromantiker writes of an idealized medieval world united in a Christian culture.

Chateaubriand's *Le génie du Christianisme*, of course, argues that the Christian religion fosters genius, liberty, poetry, art and virtuous passions in general. The central flaw of the work is the assumption that the mere exaltation of Christianity's beauty, the simple pronouncement that it is "superior to" paganism and the gods of the ancients, are somehow sufficient to show its triumphant truth. Nevertheless, with its praise of

gothic cathedrals, courtly love and knights in shining armor, this extremely influential essay did much to rehabilitate the Middle Ages in European eyes. Two years after Schlegel's lectures on romanticism, Chateaubriand similarly argues for replacing the exhausted classical models with medieval ones. But unlike Schlegel, Chateaubriand formulates that melancholic malady known as the *mal du siècle*, for which religion is the consolation. The book appeared at a propitious time in France: it argues for the heart and imagination as against the dry logic of the Enlightenment, and it reestablishes religion as something other than ridiculous (*contra* Voltaire). The goals of the French Revolution (liberty, justice, etc.) are better served and far better attained, argues Chateaubriand (rather counter-intuitively, given the Revolution's views on religion), through Christianity than through political force.<sup>11</sup>

August Wilhelm Schlegel's *History of Romantic Literature*, written two years later, is a more complicated argument. I will highlight only the significant aspects for our purposes here. First of all, here the word "Europe" emerges as central. Christianity, writes August Wilhelm, is the foundation (*Grundprinzip*) of European unity.<sup>12</sup> In this text, moreover, "Europe" means above and beyond all, the German people. The German people, we are told, come from the "heart" of Europe and, having wandered everywhere, have created its major identity. Binaries of alterity — principally "them" *versus* "us"—abound. Christianity, the foundation of Europe as we have seen, is idealistic, whereas Islam is realistic. Europe is feudal, the Orient despotic. The Occident places emphasis on individuality; the Orient strives toward a "universal and fatal" unity. The North has "calmer blood." And so on. The political is, as with Friedrich Schlegel, put into the mix. A.W. Schlegel uses romantic as a synonym for "the new Europe." He refers to the Middle Ages as a time of "*Christlicher Patriotismus*", and clearly wants the new Europe to emulate same. The Europeans "had" to fight the Saracens during the Crusades as much for political as

for religious reasons. German literature should henceforth look to its own past for its myths and stories — not only to resist classical models, but also to find its own identity. Knightly love, the *Minnesänger*, German myths, the *Nibelungen*, Charlemagne — all these should be mined for the modern literature. Even the Spanish Amadis or Arthur and his round table are preferable to Apollo, Minerva, and company. In short, all *Poesie* must have a mythological basis (here as elsewhere August Wilhelm follows his brother), and the *Geist* of the romantic age lies in medieval heroic mythology. The *fabliaux* show a marvelous and idealized world, as do the love songs of the Provençal Troubadours.

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Tieck, meanwhile, studies the schwäbisch medieval tradition and produces his work on the *Minnelieder*. The “united nationality of Europe” is meant to inspire such returns to its own medieval roots and legends. The Middle Ages are to be emulated, because in their political and religious unity, they possessed a universality of spirit and constantly moved toward the infinite.

What is this “united nationality of Europe” in this context if not the German romantic movement engaging every sphere for the dream of a political as well as philosophical unity? Unity in the mixture of philosophy, literature, the arts, Christianity, science, history, political authority — in short, everything. While August Wilhelm sings the praises of other medieval traditions in Europe — that of Spain, Portugal, France, Italy — what interests him the most, of course, are the people of the “heart” of Europe. Indeed, for August Wilhelm, there is a direct genealogy leading to this new, German movement, and it goes as follows: Provençal — Spanish — Portuguese — Italian (Dante, Calderon, Petrarque, Boccaccio) — to German romanticism with all that it encompasses. The Germans may not have a strong medieval tradition like those countries just mentioned, but, says August Wilhelm, the German romantic movement is now awake, and knows better than all the rest of Europe what real (*echt*) poetry is all about (what August Wilhelm calls *gelehrte*

*Poesie*). As Friedrich Schlegel wants to return to mythology, but with the consciousness of modernity, so August Wilhelm wants a return to Europe, but with the same self-consciousness. The new mythology of one is the new Europe of the other, with distance (cultural, religious, temporal) from the Middle Ages providing the *Haltung* of irony and thus the vision of unity. In August Wilhelm's text we find a different emphasis on synthesis: the aesthetic slides into the political; the religious into the military; the philosophical into the historical; the Christian into Catholic patriotism; the medieval into a Teutonic romanticism superior to the capacities of other European nations. The vision is more experiential and nationalistic, and resoundingly geographical. The agenda of both Schlegels, however, is the same move: from the varied emerges the unitary. Schelling's *Reich Gottes* [kingdom of God]; Hegel and Hölderlin's theories of the new man in the divine kingdom, share some of these Schlegelian notions. The Germanic subtext begins to emerge more clearly: nationalism is unity, and as such can claim to be part of an aesthetic and philosophical revolution.

But it is Novalis's *Die Christenheit oder Europa* (1799) that inaugurates such rhetoric, even if in a more poetic and dreamy manner. "There was once a beautiful, shining time," begins this text, "in which Europe was a Christian land, wherein all men were part of that Christian world. A great community interest bound together the farthest flung provinces of this spiritual kingdom." Humans were then as the children of heaven, and "every member of the community's body was honored." The time was one of real Christianity, because it was a Catholic community. It was Paradise on earth, but men were not sufficiently mature or educated to appreciate it. And so Europe was torn apart.<sup>13</sup>

It is at best difficult to imagine the Middle Ages as a paradise. Never mind the Inquisition (which, by the way, used the same metaphor of members of a body, but focused on amputation — i.e. the execution of the heretic — for the purpose



of keeping the body "clean."). Never mind disease, plagues, illiteracy, serfdom and constant wars. For Novalis this kingdom on earth was disrupted by the Reformation. Protestantism divided the indivisible, setting the Church and state at odds. The Reformation, moreover, is a social as well as religious break for Novalis. It is amplified, as it were, by the rise of science, such that *Glauben* and *Lieben* are replaced by *Wissen* and *Haben*.<sup>14</sup> Industry and trade combine to make a proto-capitalism with private enterprise. In the sixteenth century, he continues, even art is commercialized. Hence in (the unfinished) *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, in its late medieval setting, merchants recognize Heinrich as a poet. In the unity of the Middle Ages, Novalis suggests here, the commercial and the poetic are not separated. Thus long before Max Weber, Novalis articulates the link between Protestantism and capitalism. For him, however, they are the end of the unity achieved in the Middle Ages. The Enlightenment breaks the harmony of the world and things become, in Novalis's words, "unnatural." Spirit is gone, as are the mysterious, the dark and the wondrous. Everything is now well-scrubbed and mathematical, and in the harsh light of day.

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But, says Novalis, the spirit will rise again like a phoenix. In fact, Germany is already slowly but surely leading the way for the other European countries, which are presently too busy with war and politics to notice, but will eventually see the light. The Messiah will come back as promised, in the form of the Genius — a great and certainly German poet of the new romantic philosophy. The "real" church will rise again as well, and (with the bread and wine of communion as model) everything phenomenal will ultimately be an analogy for a "higher world." Novalis's vision, then, is of a "new golden age" (his words) in which the dark unity of the Middle Ages, disturbed as it was by the Enlightenment and the Reformation, will be returned to but with consciousness. The echoes to Schlegel's new mythology but with consciousness are evident. For Novalis, only religion can reawaken Europe, and that means the Roman Catholic Church.

A new Jerusalem will come, he tells us, and it will be a Europe without borders with Germany as the capital. Thus Germany, and the Romantic project in particular, will be the location for the new City of God. Clearly influenced by Schleiermacher's *Über die Religion*, Novalis uses Christus and Europe interchangeably (as he uses Christus and Sophie interchangably in *Hymnen an die Nacht*), magic and myth as symbols of unity, and the idea of Germany as the nation which will and must unite, in order to return the new Europe to the magic of Christianity. *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is the exemplum of which *Die Christenheit oder Europa* is the theory. The novel argues for an ontology of transubstantiation, of which nationalism is one of the aspects.

As Paul Mendes-Flohr has noted, until Germany became a nation (only in 1870 under Bismarck), those who longed for a unified Germany were forced to resort to ethnic or cultural criteria. The Volksnation, writes Mendes-Flohr, was the notion of a given people that, "ontologically prior to the state, is bound less by an original accord than by a common relation of its members to some combination of historical memory, geography, kinship, tradition, mores, religion and language."<sup>15</sup> It is this combination that Novalis, A.W.Schlegel, Tieck and Fichte are struggling to articulate. And the Middle Ages are all the more a natural choice, one could say, for writers who believe (as Freud did himself, later) that humanity progresses such that, as we have seen, the "moderns" (in the French sense) are blessed with more consciousness than were the classical writers so long emulated. In this perspective, the Middle Ages are still a time of childhood — before modernity and its sophisticated vision. "The Child is father of the Man," Wordsworth was to write. Breithaupt suggests that the sudden emergence of childhood as the model of selfhood in the late eighteenth century stems from "the child's weakness and absolute reliance on the outside [that] turns out to be the condition of possibility for selfhood." (Breithaupt: 78) What is arguably the case is that, just as there would be, according to

Schlegel, a return to classical myth but with consciousness, so there would be a return to the perceived unity of the Middle Ages for this new age — a unity which would include, it was hoped, a German state at last.

Paul de Man may be right when he argues, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, that we are still too close to the romantics to be able to see them clearly. "...romanticism," he writes, "necessarily appears to us in a Titanic light which no amount of demythologizing can entirely dissolve."<sup>16</sup> We have a love-hate relationship with the romantics, he adds. But, writes de Man, the romantics gave us the act of interpretation as it is practiced today, and "we cannot avoid the interpretive task left us by our romantic precursors if, for our part, we would achieve a historical significance." We owe tribute, he concludes, to their "poetic magnanimity." Indeed, no doubt the critical tools provided us by theorists such as Schlegel and much of his circle allow us to reinterpret much of their project as problematic (even as we use Freud, for example, to critique Freud's own texts). The *Haltung* of irony as articulated by Schlegel is one of the great contributions to critical theory; the view of the Middle Ages, on the other hand, betrays a naïve notion of the past, and disturbing implications based on notions of unification — and this at several levels. But it is perhaps with the *Haltung* contributed to us by Schlegel that we can stand back and see the (very real) problems, even as we recognize the poetic magnanimity which formed the *früromantiker* agenda. <<

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[1] For example, Lacoue-Labarthe's and Jean-Luc Nancy's *L'Absolu littéraire*, a work which in many ways (re)introduces (very tardily) the *Frühromantiker* project to the French readership, and in terms that insist on that project's radicality. See also M.H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, Norton, 1973). Abrams consistently argues that the early romantics (English and German) are "innovative," "revolutionary," part of a "comprehensive intellectual tendency" which marks a break with the eighteenth century. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this article are mine.

This essay was given, among other places, as a lecture at the University of Porto in November of 2006. I have benefited greatly from the discussion which ensued.

[2] See, of course, the important study by Manfred Frank, *Einführung in die frühromantische Ästhetik* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1989). See as well Benedetto Croce's *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, translation Henry Furst (New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1933). Croce argues that the French revolution of 1789 had its parallel in Germany in a revolution of thought, a "mental revolution" in Croce's term. He also notes, however, that while the "Germanism" that pervaded Europe around 1800 was revolutionary and innovative, and the grounding for notions of liberty, it also had a conservative element which was unacknowledged. See in particular, for the purposes of this article, Chapter II, "Opposing Religious Faiths." See also by Manfred Frank "Wie reaktionär war eigentlich die Frühromantik?" in *Athenäum*: 7 (1997, 141-166). On the Frühromantiker and religion, see Jutta Osinski, "Harmonie statt Anarchie? Zeitkritik in der katholischen Romantik" 1994, in *Aurora*: 54; S. 190-203. Other useful works include: Hans J. Münk: "Die deutsche Romantik in Religion und Theologie," Helmut Schanze, editor, in *Romantik-Handbuch*. (Stuttgart, Kröner, 1994), 556-589; Siegmund Hellerich *Religionizing, Romanizing Romantics: the Catholic-Christian Camouflage of the Early German Romantics: Wackenroder, Tieck, Novalis, Friedrich & August Wilhelm Schlegel* (Frankfurt am Main, Lang, 1995); Alfred von Martin, *Romantischer "Katholizismus" und katholische "Romantik": das Wesen der romantischen Religiosität* (Egelsbach, Hänsel-Hohenhausen, 1992).

[3] Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (London and New York, Verso, 2002), 3.

[4] See Niklas Luhmann, "Individuum, Individualität, Individualismus," *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik*, 4 vols. (Frankfurt, 1989), 3.149-258.

[5] Of course, it does not always keep anxiety at bay, such promises of unity. As Fritz Breithaupt argues, instead of celebrating their genius and originality, the Germans in the late 18th century "only recognize that they cannot meet the demand set by the notion of *das Ich*. Thus, instead of gaining a self, the German romantics suffer from their perceived weakness in failing to accomplish the creation of a self." In Breithaupt's view, this failure leads to the idea of trauma "as a possible remedy for the impossibility of the self." See Fritz Breithaupt, "The Invention of Trauma in German Romanticism," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 32 #1, Autumn 2005 (77-101), p. 78. I don't disagree with this view; I am merely pointing out that the "invention" of a transcendental, or absolute, born of the sense of fragmentation and division, serves a similar purpose of attempting to shore up the pieces.

[6] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "Vierte Vorlesung," *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben* (Hamburg, F. Meiner, 1954), 69.

[7] Friedrich Schlegel, *Charakteristiken und Kritiken*, Vol. I, Hans Eichner, editor (Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 1967), 217.

[8] One exception, it could be argued, is Tieck's 1803 translation of the Minnelieder. The work had an important influence on the study of Germanistik, but was later criticized for its errors and scholarly inaccuracies. Ludwig Tieck, *Minnelieder aus dem Schwäbischen Zeitalter* (Hildesheim, Georg Olms, 1966).

[9] It should not be forgotten that the Germans were greatly influenced by the French *querelle* between the "ancients" and the "moderns." The "moderns" believed that the ancients could be surpassed if the contemporary writers in France used their knowledge and combined it with old mythology. The parallel with Schlegel's "new mythology" is readily apparent. See, on this subject, Larry F. Norman, "Homère entre anciens et modernes, *Lalies: langue et littérature*, #25 (Paris, Presses de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure, 2005), 59-110.

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[10] On the role of dead women as muse in the texts of the *Frühromantiker*, see William Stephen Davis, "'Menschwerdung der Menschen': Poetry and Truth in Hardenberg's Hymnen an die Nacht and the Journal of 1797," *Athenäum: Jahrbuch für Romantik*, 4, Jahrgang, 1994 (Schöningh), 239-259.

[11] See the magisterial work of Marc Fumaroli, *Chateaubriand: Poésie et terreur*, Paris, Fallois, 2003.

[12] To appreciate how strong this notion remains, consider Turkey's attempt today to join the E.U.

[13] Novalis, *Werke und Briefe*, edited and with an afterward by Alfred Kellertat, (Munich, Winkler, 1968), 389.

[14] Novalis, it should not be forgotten, was also a scientist – he studied geology, mineralogy, and mining. He wrote several articles on geological and mineralogical subjects. He was not, in other words, as purely poetical as he is frequently regarded. Indeed, his short career performs the very combination of science and poetry which his early work appears to reject (e.g. "Wenn nicht Zahlen und Figuren" Kellertat, 295).

[15] Paul Mendes-Flohr, *German Jews: A Dual Identity*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988, 4-5, 16.

[16] Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1984, 65.

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